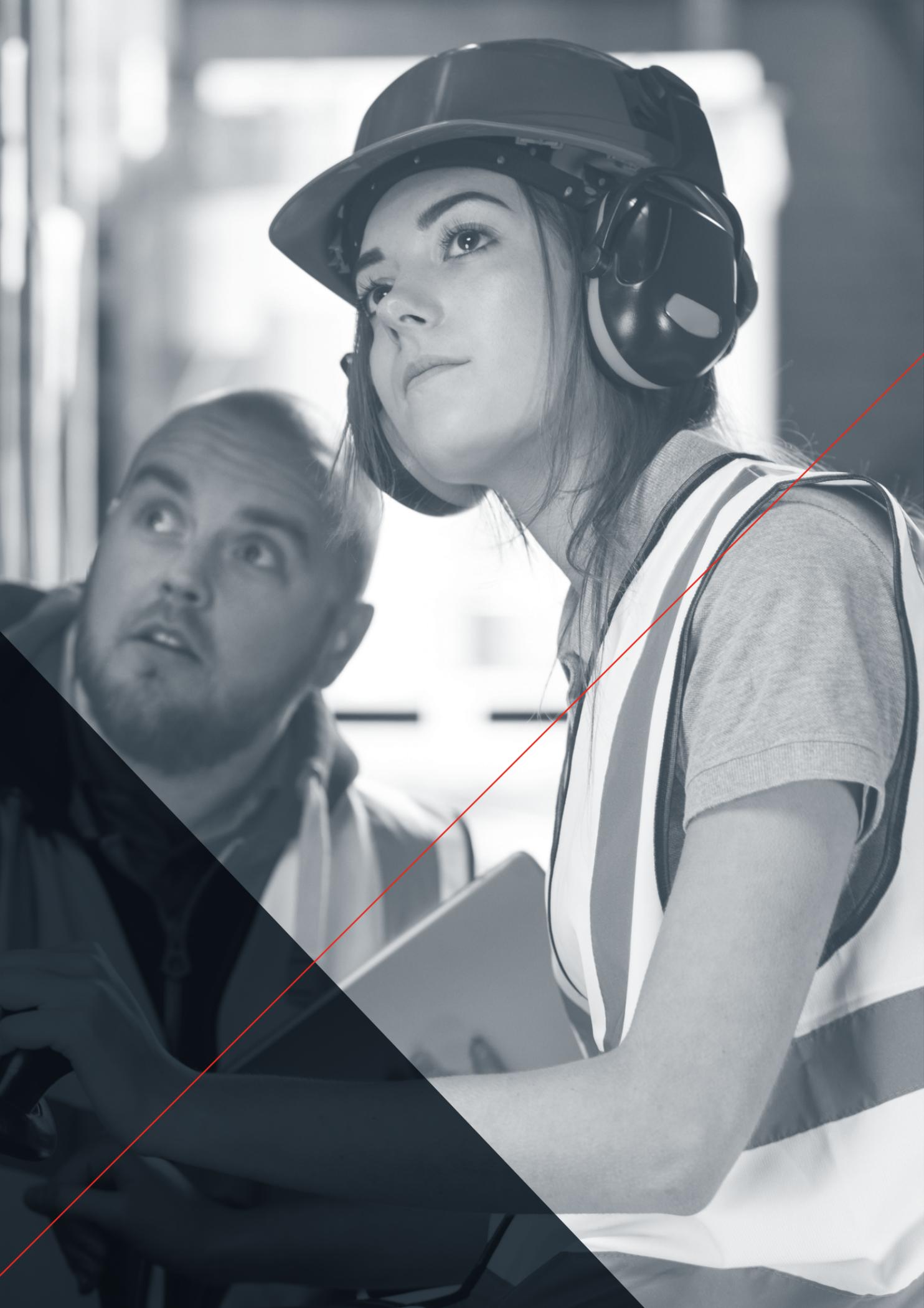


Youth employment accessibility research

**ACCESS
GENERATION.** 



Access Generation CIC is a social enterprise that was established in September 2016.

Our primary aim is to encourage businesses to employ inexperienced young people (16 to 24 year olds) by providing straight-forward free practical guidance online at www.accessgeneration.co.uk. We want to help small to medium businesses build their own pool of talent and become an employer of choice for young people.

Fact finding

Since forming Access Generation we have interviewed HR and talent professionals from companies who actively recruit young people to learn from their experiences.

We also talked to businesses who were not actively recruiting young people many of whom expressed negative opinions about young people's behaviour, expectations and method of searching for a job. We felt that any research should go back to source and reflect the opinions, experience and expectations of young people.

We also researched the state of youth employment in the UK and looked at existing research and reports. 826,000 16 to 24 year-olds are not in education, employment or training (NEETs). There are existing reports by the CIPD and Prince's Trust that highlighted jargon in job descriptions as a barrier to work.

Source:

NEET Report
<http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06705>

CIPD Report
<http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/youth/sme-guide>

Prince's Trust Report
<http://futureproof.bitc.org.uk/jargonfreejobs>



We felt there was a gap in youth employment research around the quantity and extent of barriers to employment that young people face so we wanted to conduct our own.

Workshops with young people

We engaged with the employability team at De Montfort University and with their support arranged a workshop with students. The following questions were asked of a group of nine students:

- What are your preferred methods of job hunting?
- Do you use social media to job hunt and if so, which platforms?
- What are your criteria for choosing an employer?

In groups of three, the students then looked at a sample of job sections on company websites. The students then added their comments on what was done well, adequate, poor or missing, on to post-it notes which were plotted under three headings; Candidate Journey, support and Employer Brand. These headings were created based on initial feedback with regard to the challenges faced when applying online. The challenges fell into three main areas; navigation, information supporting the job application and what the company said about itself.

We then engaged with the Talent Match Leicester team who helped us to run two further workshops with 18 young people who have been unemployed for more than 12 months. We asked the young people the same questions as the university students plus we asked the young people through Talent Match to tell us about their experiences of applying for jobs and the obstacles or challenges they may have faced.

When we collated the feedback from young people with Talent Match it validated what the students had found in the initial sample of companies. The language used by young people at Talent Match was different to the university students, however, the principles were the same. For example, both students and young people engaged in Talent Match Leicester told us that they wanted: 'a supportive employer who is open to all' (Talent Match); 'an employer who values equality and diversity' (Student).

Through the workshops with young people, we identified that 80% of young people look for work on the job section of company websites. Only 20% had heard of or used LinkedIn and social media is only used to research a company before applying online. There was also negative feedback with regards to recruitment agencies and training companies so this was not cited as a preferred method of job hunting.

Feedback from workshop discussions included comments about the application process, the use of clichés, buzz phrases and jargon, difficulties with global brands and the expectation of registering without obtaining any information about available positions or the company:

"After I send my application online I never hear anything back and I didn't know who I could talk to about it at the company."

"It sometimes feels like you're submitting your application into a black hole and there's no information about next steps."

"Businesses all say the same thing, like they all invest in their people. But I want to know what that means and how it will help me get to the next level in my career"

"When a local business is also part of a global brand we found it difficult to access the job section and when we did find it we were taken off to a foreign website with only global jobs listed."

"Some companies expect you to register before you even see any information about working for them. I wouldn't register to shop online before browsing what was available to buy."

"Companies either use jargon or are too generic and not specific."

This feedback was used to refine the assessment categories, questions and scoring criteria. Following this initial fact finding and consultations with young people, the following objectives were established:

Objectives

- Establish if there was an issue with regard to youth employment accessibility online
- Establish how many companies are accessible for young people and what good looks like
- Find out what specific areas need improvement (e.g. Candidate Journey, support, Employer Brand)
- Identify potential areas of support that would help businesses make their recruitment processes accessible to young people

Assessment Matrix Development

On the basis of collating the feedback from young people on what they want from an employer and the obstacles faced, Access Generation used this information to create and structure draft questions. Access Generation then engaged with Dr Rebecca Steer and a young person, Peter Colley, from Talent Match, to further develop and refine this assessment tool. Collectively, this research team completed this process for developing and refining the criteria, questions and scoring over four phases.

1. The research team reviewed the draft questions and removed any duplicate questions and amended the questions and criteria/theme headings. For each question we created a scoring matrix and agreed specific examples for each level of the scoring matrix. Each of the research team then independently carried out an initial assessment of the same 10 companies to test the scoring.
2. The research team met to discuss any variance in question, criteria or scoring interpretation, clarifying and adjusting scoring and criteria examples and reaching agreement where there were differences in scores given. Peter then repeated the assessment of the initial 10 companies and an additional 10 (20 total) with the refined scoring matrix. The scoring of these 20 companies was sample checked to assess consistency and agreement of scoring using the refined scoring matrix.

3. Once again the research team met to discuss the refined scoring matrix and resolve any scoring discrepancies. With this sample of 20 companies we discovered that the scoring created an unrealistic result for some and gave a disproportionate scoring on other sections, particularly for companies who did not have a jobs/vacancies page, or no available positions to assess. We therefore introduced four 'Key Entry Criteria' questions to establish if a company had a youth entry point. In addition, we made some scoring criteria adjustments, and further clarification of examples. Specific scoring examples and discrepancies were discussed and resolved. Peter then repeated the analysis of the 20 companies whilst a small number were sample checked.
4. The research team met a final time and agreed that the scoring matrix was now consistent between raters and appropriate and proportionate for use. A total sample of the 50 pilot company websites (including the initial 20) were then surveyed against the now refined scoring matrix and questions. This process aimed to ensure that the survey questions and scoring was reliable and robust.

Matrix Themes:

Questions were grouped under five headings, Key Entry Criteria, Candidate Journey, Support, Employer Brand and Overall Quality.

Key Entry Criteria

The purpose of the Key Entry Criteria was to better assess whether companies are immediately accessible for young people, such that they have at least one entry point for young people such as being mobile friendly or having clearly stated employment opportunities for young people. In addition, if the key entry point of a jobs/vacancies page did not exist, or if no vacancies were currently available, companies would subsequently score zero for questions pertaining to the quality and clarity of job descriptions and the application process, as it was not possible to assess this. In this case, an organisation may still be scored on these Key Entry Criteria which would provide an indication of their accessibility for young people. For these criteria, where the questions relate to a simple presence or absence of a capability or feature then a score of 5 was applied to 'Yes' and 0 to 'No'. For example: *Was the job section mobile friendly?* This scale contained 4 items and a maximum total score of 20. Scores for Key Entry Criteria were assessed separately to the total score obtained across the subsequent four themes.

Candidate Journey

This subscale contained four items and was concerned with a young person's experience of the process of finding, identifying and applying for jobs online. The maximum total score for this subscale was 20.

Support

This subscale contained seven items and was concerned with the availability, clarity and accessibility of content and information regarding the role, stages of the application process, guidance for applicants, and potential progression opportunities. The maximum total score for this subscale was 35.

Employer Brand

This subscale contained six items and was concerned with content that provides information to the candidate about the organisations' mission, purpose and values, the organisational culture including equality and diversity, and the experiences of employees and customers. The maximum total score for this subscale was 30.

Overall Quality

This subscale contained two items and was concerned with the Overall Quality of the website and consistency of the organisations' brand across all parts of their website, including their main site and vacancy and application pages. The maximum total score for this subscale was 10.

For each question under the four themes assessed, scoring ranged from 0 – *not evident or missing to 5 – evident and well presented with examples*. As previously described, each question had specific scoring criteria and examples against which it was assessed. For example, the question 'Is the application process and key stages clearly identified?' where 0 = *No job section and/or no job adverts to 5 = Step by step, timings, next steps and opportunities for feedback*.

The maximum total score for the four themes was 95.

Results

Total scores and Key Entry Criteria

Six companies scored zero on Key Entry Criteria, indicating that they did not fulfill any of the key criteria for young people to attract them to apply for employment opportunities, such as being mobile friendly or having obvious youth employment opportunities displayed on their website. Conversely, nine companies received the maximum score of 20 for this section, indicating that they are open, available and accessible to young people (Figure 1).

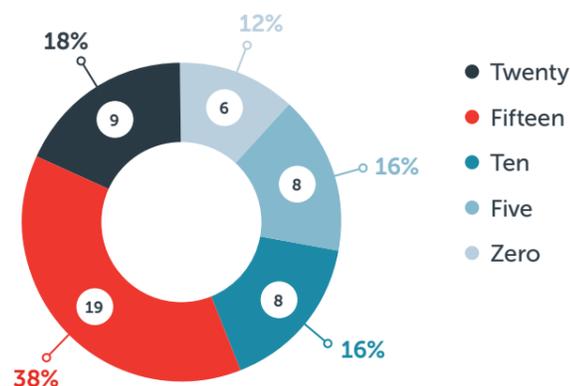


Figure 1. Company scoring on Key Entry Criteria

Total scores for the remaining four themes ranged from 6 to 79 out of 95. As indicated in Figure 2, only two companies achieved scores greater than 75, whilst just over half (26) of the companies assessed scored between 50 and 74. Conversely, eleven companies achieved a score less than 25, indicating that they are performing poorly in meeting the key themes identified as important to young people during their job search. While twenty-eight (56%) of the companies assessed performed moderately well to very well across these key themes, scoring 50 or more out of 95, twenty-two companies (44%) did not sufficiently demonstrate overall that they were open to or currently offer employment opportunities specifically for young people.

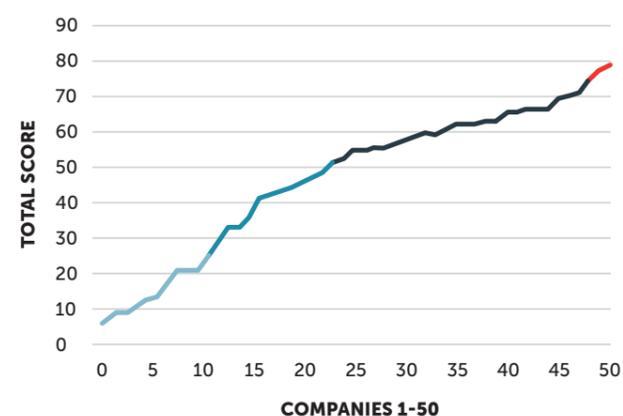


Figure 2. Total scores of companies assessed, by score (<25, 26-50, 51-75, >76).

Total score was moderately, positively correlated with Key Entry Criteria ($r=.56, p<.01$) indicating that business who met these Key Entry Criteria for young people achieved better overall scores across the four themes.

In particular, scores on Key Entry Criteria were most strongly associated with Candidate Journey ($r=.63, p<.001$), indicating that companies who fulfill more of the Key Entry Criteria for accessibility for young people, were also likely to achieve higher scores on Candidate Journey. This suggests that these employers are those who have specifically geared their technology, opportunities and application process to attract and meet the needs and expectations of young people.

In contrast, Key Entry Criteria was most weakly associated with Employer Brand ($r=.36, p<.05$), indicating that whilst a strong Employer Brand is attractive, it may be insufficient to meet the needs and expectations of young people searching for employment opportunities. As such, business should not rely alone on the power of their brand if they hope to attract young people to their workforce.

Candidate Journey

Overall, the 50 companies assessed performed moderately well for Candidate Journey, with a 'good' mean score of 9.2 out of 20 (Mode = 11). Six companies (12%) scored 4 or 5 for every question, indicating that their Candidate Journey was very good or excellent. These companies would meet a young person's expectations for the use of technology, functionality and ease of use.

Conversely, 20 companies (40%) scored 2 or less for every question in this section. Of these, five companies (10%) scored zero. These companies therefore failed to meet young people's expectations for their journey as potential applicants. Online application processes were not fit for purpose, did not work or were not present. There were examples of links that were 'dead' or go round in a loop, and in one instance, ending up on a group company in France.

In particular, Question 1.3 addressed the ease of the process of applying online. Seventeen companies (34%) scored zero which meant the functionality was either missing or didn't work. Question 1.4 examined the availability of options for young people on the job section. Twenty-two companies (44%) scored zero which meant this was also missing and suggests these companies either do not clearly display options for young people, or opt for experienced candidates only. Low scores for Candidate Journey and in particular questions 1.3 and 1.4, effectively close the door on young people's opportunities to access work. This is a poor reflection on a company and young people are likely to leave their website quickly and go elsewhere.



1 in 3 businesses had technical processes or functionality that was missing or didn't work

Support

Overall, more companies performed poorly on the Support subscale than any other (Mean = 14.7, Mode = 0/35). Only five companies (10%) scored 3 or above for all the support questions, with only two companies (4%) scoring 4 or 5 on every question representing good or excellent scores. Eighteen companies (36%) scored 2 or less for every question, while thirteen companies (26%) scored zero, indicating that overall, support for young people as potential candidates was poor or missing.

Companies performed particularly poorly on questions 2.4 and 2.5. These questions referred to how clearly the application process and key stages were identified and explained, and the presence of guidance to support potential candidates to make a good application, respectively. Forty-one companies (82%) scored 2 or less for both questions. This indicates that the majority of companies could make substantial improvements in their accessibility and attractiveness to young people if they were to provide:

- Clear statements and explanation of what skills attributes are being looked for
- Explanation of the application process, timescales and opportunities for feedback

This is a shocking revelation and reflects poorly on the business community, this lack of information and clarity is likely to have a negative impact on an experienced, older candidate let alone a young person. Based on feedback from our workshops it was clear that there are problems with:

- Quality and management of the application process
- Transparency as to the key stages
- A lack of commitment to provide feedback or communicate during the process

The negative consequences of this represents a reputational risk for the company and contributes to the loss of confidence and self-esteem as candidates apply for jobs with no feedback. Further investigation is required to establish who owns the online job page and who within a company is accountable for the quality of the recruitment process.



1 in 3 businesses had support content that was very poor or missing

Support is an area that requires an awareness campaign and an education programme for the business community. This is not an area that requires an investment in money but an investment in care and empathy. Ultimately any company that applies itself and operates good practice will benefit by improved reputation and gain a competitive advantage.

Employer Brand

Overall, companies performed more strongly on Employer Brand than any other area (Mean = 16.9, Mode = 22/30). This is perhaps to be expected, however, as indicated previously, may be insufficient alone to attract young people to their workforce. Ten companies (20%) scored 4 or above on every question while eighteen companies (36%) scored 4 or above on five out of six questions. Only one company scored two or less on every question however, over half of the companies assessed (26, 52%) scored 2 or less on at least three out of six questions, indicating that despite some high scores on individual items, there is still plenty of room for improvement across other items in this area.

It was clear that employers are not fully aware of the criteria that young people apply when choosing an employer that they might wish to work for, particularly with regard to equality and diversity. This is crucially important when we consider the results of the earlier focus groups, during which young people rated diversity and equal opportunities in the top three things that they look for in an employer.

Question 3.6 assessed evidence of a company's equality and diversity policy, practices and culture. Thirty-three companies (66%) made no mention at all of equality and diversity, let alone evidence it. Where a company did state equality and diversity it was often a generic statement without specific examples or evidence. The company values, therefore, did not appear to be lived and policies appeared as a tickbox exercise, this applied particularly to environment, equal opportunities and policies relating to diversity.

Only ten companies (20%) scored 4 or 5 on this question indicating that they provided equality and diversity policies, examples, and in eight cases, accreditation. The best companies gave real life examples (case studies) of how policies and values were applied to customer, suppliers and employees.

Companies that used their online presence as part of their proposition, for example retail, tended to have a quality focus on their product which did not translate to the company or jobs sections of the website. If businesses want to improve their Employer Brand to meet the criteria for young people then they need to give evidence and examples of where and how their values, purpose and policies come to life.

Quality

Although this final theme was only comprised of two items, it provides an indication of the Overall Quality of the website with regard to spelling, grammar, formatting, updates and functionality; and the consistency of the company's job pages with the rest of the site. Overall the companies assessed were split on Overall Quality scores, twenty-nine companies (58%) scored 4 or 5 for both items while fifteen companies (30%) scored 2 or less for both items.

It was noted that often job pages and/or the online application pages are somewhat neglected, such that, in the worst cases, they appear to be a different website. Common problems include: branding that is not present, old, or inconsistent with the rest of the site, a greater frequency of spelling, grammatical and formatting errors and problems, overuse of jargon and complicated language, and links or pages that are broken, missing or not recently updated.

These seemingly innocuous factors such as formatting and consistency with the main site may appear to not hold much weight for a young person searching for employment opportunities. However, young people will automatically assess these pages in reference to their expectations for ease of use, functionality and clarity of both the pages and the application process. If these initial impressions are negative and expectations are not met, young people may judge that this is a company they do not want to work for, and will quickly move on elsewhere. Businesses may inadvertently be missing out on young talent if they do not pay attention to these details.



66% of businesses did not evidence what a young person is looking for from an employer

Conclusion

There was a correlation that companies who had a youth entry point generally had a better job section overall. There was clearly an issue that many companies did not have an entry point, did not give the required support and did not provide sufficient information about the company for a young person to make a decision.

Based on this research it is clear that there are commonly occurring gaps across all themes but in particular in relation to support content and the equality and diversity aspect of Employer Branding. This work demonstrates the great potential to improve youth employment accessibility online and provides us with an opportunity to give straightforward advice and support to businesses.



In essence, the digital door to employment for young people is closed.

What support is required?

Direct engagement with businesses, including:

- **Feedback**
Specific examples of what is missing, what needs improvement compared to their peers
- **Support**
Provide examples of what good looks like
- **Education**
Provide insights into what young people are looking for from an employer.

Further work is required to better understand who owns the recruitment process and online job section and how best to engage with them. In addition, a solution to the online application process needs investigation, ideally a technical solution can be found that meets the expectation of young people, provides visibility, transparency and the potential for individual feedback. Finally, we would like to conduct further research that would extend both the sample size and sector reach, and allow for breakdown and identification of common themes by other factors such as industry and company size.

What next?

The research is well placed to bridge the gap, between initiatives working with young people and business. Access Generation can engage with businesses and provide support to help businesses benefit from recruiting from a diverse range of young people.

Access Generation aim to extend this research further in Leicestershire and look to scale up the project into other regions later on.

Acknowledgement

Initial funding and resource was provided by Talent Match Leicester. A special thanks to Emma Southern, Dr Rebecca Steer and Peter Colley. Thank you to De Montfort University for providing access to students and supporting our workshop activity. Thank you to our corporate sponsors Vacancy Filler.



Our sponsors commentary

Common misconceptions around what attracts young people to an organisation have resulted in many businesses struggling to appeal to the younger demographic. We found, and in support of what Access Generation's results show, that social media is not the preferred route to application for younger people - which is surprising as it seems to be the view that young people spend a lot of their free time on social media - but in fact a well-designed and accessible careers page is the preferred choice.

In addition to this, the feedback received by Access Generation at their workshop is not limited to this particular group; not hearing back after an application, lack of clarity around what happens next, jumping around from site to site in order to apply for a role, and difficulty understanding job descriptions, are common problems that the majority of applicants will come up against in the public and private sector, for both SME and corporate organisations.

Some organisations get it right: making it easy for candidates to find their careers section, the right balance of social advertising and job board advertising, clarity in the job description, and removing unnecessary barriers such as registering with a username and password before allowing an application to begin. It's because some organisations are getting it right that this is becoming the expected standard from young people.

Access Generation evidenced that 90% of companies in the study failed to clearly explain what skills and attributes were being looked for in the job description and also failed to inform the applicant of the expected timescales or process. We have found these two areas to be direct causes of abandoned applications and negative feedback based on their candidate experience - in some cases where a candidate is loyal to a product or organisation, particularly in the retail and hospitality sectors, a poor candidate experience can lead to the loss of a customer.

The technology to satisfy the requirements of young people, as well as other demographics, is available and many candidates will have experienced an enjoyable application process at some point throughout their job searching, so candidates are coming to expect a quality process and almost assume that should the recruitment process be poor, so will their experience as an employee.



Jason Staniforth
Marketing Director,
Vacancy Filler Recruitment Solutions

The research by Access Generation CIC gives us real insights and key learnings that are useful for young people and businesses. There are many misconceptions around young people and how they view digital technology.

There are also assumptions that parents and family will support the younger generation with the job application process, but this is often a process and journey parents have never been through themselves, as technology and processes have progressed since their own job application experiences. There is a requirement for a young person to understand the process and for an employer to hold some responsibility for the quality of the experience.

The online world today works in a fairly intuitive way and when it comes to applying for a job the expectation is for the same initiative experience.

Remember this is a significant life event for the young person that requires the application of both integrity and accountability from the employer. This research will help inform business from a young person point of view and provide the insights required to make the online job application process more accessible.



Emma Southern
Talent Match Leicester Manager,
Prince's Trust



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Get involved

If you want to be included in the research, attend a workshop seminar or speak to us further please call **Chris Tarry** on **07976403301** or email **chris.tarry@accessgeneration.co.uk**

For more information visit
www.accessgeneration.co.uk